

BIB 221 Poetry and Wisdom

Lesson 5 - Interpretation and Inscriptions

Intro. The most common form of interpretation is to establish context, however, in the psalms many times we are unable to accomplish that. The most universally recognized form of division is the five books of Psalms from last lesson. However, they contribute little into the interpretation of an individual psalm. The psalms are also divided according to author, which name of God is used or emphasized, and who was responsible for compiling the psalms in their present form. Now we are going to look at properly interpreting the psalms in order to understand their meaning or to rightly divide them.

We will look at the different aspects of a particular psalm that allows us to properly interpret the meaning of the psalm. There is also the use of titles which give us further information about them that are helpful to obtaining a better understanding of the psalm.

1. Interpreting the Psalms
2. Historical background - though it is difficult many times to establish the historical background, if it is accomplished the dividing of the psalm becomes extremely easier. Very few times is the setting given in the title and the background must be determined from the psalm itself. If the historical setting is not apparent, then it was likely intended not to refer to a single instance rather an experience that is common to men across various backgrounds.

Example: Psalm 3 - understanding that this takes place when David is fleeing from Absalom allows us to place ourselves into the situation and better understand the thoughts and expressions that are given in the psalm.

2. Religious significance - How does this help us to understand our relationship with God better or how we approach God?

Example: Psalm 51 gives us a vivid example of repentance, confession, and restoration; especially if it is understood in the historical background of David's sin with Bathsheba.

3. Procedural principles - These are questions that can be asked of the text to help us classify and understand the intent of the writer. It serves to narrow our focus down to be able to understand the intent of the author. This difficulty is unique to the psalms because they are singing about different events without a narrative to establish context like other portions of scripture.
4. Personal vs. Corporate perspective - is it talking about an individual experience or the experience of the nation?
5. Historical circumstances - war, worship, sin, prayer, etc. What is the main subject being addressed? Ps. 8 creation of man
6. Emotional orientation - is the author praising or lamenting?
7. Liturgical usage - Is the psalm written for temple worship? Ps. 136 Is it written to be read on a certain feast day? There were certain Psalms that were sung during the morning offering each day of the week:
-Sat. - 92 Sun. - 24 Mon. -48 Tue. - 82 Wed. - 94 Thr. - 81 Fri. - 93
-Dedication of the house - David Ps. 30

8. NT usage - Is the psalm quoted, interpreted, or attributed to an author in the NT? David Ps. 2
2. Inscription: Titles and Descriptions - very good point about the inscriptions possibly being a subscription instead of a superscription. Part of it may belong to the psalm above it instead of the psalm that follows.
3. Describing the type of Psalm
4. Maschil - Instruction or understanding Ps. 78
5. Michtam - engraven indicating emphasis or permanence “golden poem” personal and private prayer or meditation Ps. 16
6. Shiggaion - loud cry (grief or joy) Ps. 7
7. Musical setting or performance information
8. To the chief musician
9. Neginoth - play on stringed instrument
10. Nehiloth - wind instrument - flute, clarinet, etc.
11. Alamoth - maidens sung by sopranos
12. Sheminith - male choir
13. Mahalath - dancing with shouting - bringing up the ark
14. Selah - most popular used - singers pause
15. Higgsaion - instrument pause
16. Liturgical usage - mentioned above declares when used Ex. 92 for Sabbath
17. Authorship
18. Occasion - Ex. Fleeing from Saul

Conclusion

This portion of scripture is not similar to other types of prose because it is poetry. However, it can be rightly divided and may require more study to enter into the life of the text to establish the correct interpretation. It is not acceptable here or elsewhere in scripture to rip a verse out of context and give a meaning foreign to the text.